Feminism Reframed
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The Feminist Art Project

Anne Swartz

Second-wave theorists had the advantage of clear boundaries between their predecessors’ experiences and their situation, as opposed to what some call a lack of clarity in boundaries today; they also had to tackle questions like “am I a cultural feminist or a political feminist?,” which are distinctions no longer in circulation permitting other questions to come to the fore.¹ Analysis of the feminine and feminized body, celebration of womanhood, critiques of gender, the liminal space of transexuality, potentials/possibilities for feminist utopias and dystopias, and the consequence or lack thereof of feminist interventions are all at issue today, as well as some of the persistent issues from the second-wave and the lack of consistency in use of third-wave terminology. This discussion was most sharply brought into focus in early 2007 in America with two conferences, one held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, called The Feminist Future, and the other held as part of the College Art Association’s annual conference (CAA 2007) under the aegis of The Feminist Art Project (TFAP).² Both series of panels included a wide variety of visual arts professionals—historians, critics, and artists. I was directly involved in creating the latter sessions and want to address how they evolved, finally reflecting on how the experience relates to pertinent questions and issues in feminist art, many of which this text has explored. I bring to the reader’s attention the history of TFAP as an initiative, up to CAA 2007, to showcase a specific set of circumstances that reveal one bridge between second- and third-wave feminist art history, to document

¹ “Arlene Raven interview by Cheri Gaulke,” 13.
² Recent exhibitions have also raised these issues about feminism and art: WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, curated by Connie Butler, which originated at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and Global Feminisms, curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin, which originated at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art at the Brooklyn Museum of Art.
that important historical series of panels, and to conclude this book with a primary account of feminist art history. Above all, I want to indicate that the merging of theory and practice can, ultimately, beget activism, which is the strongest outcome of any discussion surrounding feminist art.

The relationships between theory and practice are integral to any history of feminism in contemporary art, since the artist now has available many systems—methods, techniques—to expose the privileging social and critical structures defining woman’s relationship to the world. But these same systems have often resulted in many women not having opportunities to participate in exhibitions, having work collected by private patrons or by museums, and generally, not seeing their work get much attention. Groups like the Guerilla Girls and the Brainstormers have devoted much time and effort to performing and documenting the biases in the artworld against women, which disproportionately leave them out of the market and the dialogue. Rather than getting depressed or abandoning their art, most feminist artists and visual arts professionals try and find ways to work from within the system to counter the prejudice and dismissals they experience or witness, or they get angry and then try and get involved. Token efforts such as the announcement that the Tate will endeavour to increase its holdings of art by women are welcomed, but more is needed to correct the unevenness in their collections. As a result, feminism remains much-needed in the international art scene.

How it exists and what feminist art is, though, are difficult to categorize and comprehend because of the many different interpretations of what it is or can be, and the different forms it may take. My feminism has focused on access—that women should have equal opportunity—and on realities—that women have not had equal opportunities. In relation to the world of art and the dialogue around it, I have been most interested in the ways women’s psychological lives exist in their art and the archetypal imagery women seem to share in their work. I learned a great deal about my feminism and understanding of art by reading the work of American art critic Arlene Raven. We became friends when I was first researching

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3 Akbar, “Tate admits need to buy more works by women artists.” The title of this article seems a bit tabloid in tone for the content, as if the museum had taken an active role in some kind of philandering, like a wayward politician admitting to theft or infidelity.

4 I have written elsewhere about my perspective: see Swartz, “Feminist Art: A Reassessment.”

5 Arlene’s life and work is the subject of a volume I co-edited with Johanna Burton, for which I also wrote a critical biographical essay on Arlene. See Swartz, “She Is Who She Wants To Be.”
the work of artist Nancy Grossman, her longtime partner about whom she had written a monograph. In 2005, we got involved in planning the day of panels and exhibitions that would become The Feminist Art Project events at CAA 2007.

Arlene died from cancer in August of 2006, months before CAA 2007. But we discussed and laboured over every detail of these panels and events until two weeks before she died. Ever committed to feminism and contemporary art, she worked on them when most people would have abandoned any public activity. These events began as a result of a conversation we had in the spring of 2005. Arlene and I were having lunch in New York City’s Chelsea gallery district. We were discussing the situation for women artists in the artworld, a topic we often considered. She said “You should get involved in this idea that Judy [Chicago] and I are developing.” She had been friends with Judy since they first met when Judy spoke at the First National Conference for Women in the Visual Arts at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, April 20-22, 1972, an event organized by artist Mary Beth Edelson. Though Arlene had been involved in feminist and feminist art activities, the conference radicalized her on the spot and she decided to head to Los Angeles, first for research purposes, then she was decided to remain to get involved in the burgeoning Women’s Movement, which was particularly focused on art there.

In 2005, Arlene and Judy were talking about the sudden groundswell of interest in feminist art, as represented by several exhibitions of feminist art in 2007, including WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution, curated by Connie Butler at Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, and the installation of Judy’s multi-media work The Dinner Party at the Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art alongside Global Feminisms, an exhibition curated by Maura Reilly and Linda Nochlin. Susan Fisher Sterling at the National Museum of Women in the Arts in Washington, D.C. became involved in that discussion and the three of them came up with the idea for a devoted approach, or initiative, to capitalize on all the activity around feminist art in 2007 to focus attention on ways to extend the dialogue beyond these shows and beyond that year.

I attended the first meeting in May 2005 at art historian Gail Levin’s house, which Judy facilitated, where the collected group was asked to develop ways to broaden the scope of activities. Some of the women present left, never to be heard from again. I worked closely with Judy and Arlene that summer to develop the ideas into a formal entity. But personal obligations forced me to have to step down from much involvement. So, it was with much interest that I approached Ferris Olin and Judy Brodsky
at Rutgers University about participating in the project, after Dena Muller, then-director of A.I.R. Gallery, suggested I speak to them about it. Judy Chicago remarked on how Ferris and Judy Brodsky were “our kind of gals” and Arlene noted how impressive they were as organizers. Ferris and Judy Brodsky took that idea and put the full force of their institutional building acumen behind it. They got telephone lines, a website, assistants, publicity, and so much more for TFAP. Judy Chicago, Arlene, and Susan all remained involved. Arlene’s health was declining rapidly, yet she was thoroughly committed. She was dying and she was participating completely.

Others, like me, became entranced by the possibilities of this opportunity. I mentioned to Arlene the idea of a panel at the annual conference of the College Art Association (CAA), which would meet in New York in 2007. Her reply was a classic example of her grand vision. She said, “a panel, how about a whole day?” And so, Arlene and I set about developing a day of panels, along with two exhibitions, for CAA 2007. The preparations for those panels, which included both established and emerging scholars, artists, and museum professionals, gave Arlene and me the unique opportunity to discuss her involvement in the history of feminist art. She told me endless details about her life, the people she had met and with whom feminist artists, art historians, and critics were involved, and why certain events had mattered to her. The experience was unprecedented for me, as we spoke or wrote several times a week for the last year of her life. Arlene was so committed to realizing the panels and so many people were energized to realize them, I felt I must continue to plan them, despite my reticence.

Ferris Olin and Judy Brodsky are institution builders, by any measure. The Feminist Art Project has chapters in many cities and its website lists hundreds of events happening internationally, a fitting legacy of her more recent commitment to women in the visual arts. Many feminist organizations have chapters, dispersed around America, such as Planned Parenthood or the National Organization for Women. Many feminist art organizations that Judy Brodsky has led, such as the Women’s Caucus for Art and ArtTable, went from being national organizations with a single

6 <http://feministartproject.rutgers.edu/>

7 The two exhibitions were a show of Daria Dorosh’s art at A.I.R. Gallery and a group exhibition curated by Leslie King-Hammond at Ceres Gallery, which she discusses in an essay for Critical Matrix, volume 17 (Fall 2007). A third exhibition, a group show of gallery artists, curated by Dena Muller, at A.I.R. Gallery also emerged. These events, along with many others, are discussed in Yoshimoto and Swartz, “Feminist Art Events at Conference.”
entity of members to a national leadership with local chapters. The idea is simple; local leadership means that programming locally offers more direct opportunities for involvement and provides more explicitly for the needs of its membership within its community. However, I argued, such a structure would disenfranchise participants, a lesson learned from my decade living in Savannah, Georgia, a small southeastern American city, which is a long distance culturally and geographically from the predominant urban art centres. Those outside of the major cities want access to the national organization for the connection and the prestige. But, my words fell on deaf ears and the organization was arranged with a national committee and local chapters. Much activity is centred at Rutgers University, though certainly exhibitions, panels, conferences, lectures, classes, and symposia are happening elsewhere with vigour.

The scale of The Feminist Art Project at CAA 2007 was impressive, the coalescence of feminists remarkable. Hundreds of people attended what evolved into about twenty different events. Many described the experiences as exactly the kind of discussion/dialogue visual arts professionals need to have in the art world. When Arlene and I conceived of the day of panels, we immediately set upon trying to define the panel chairs. We were successful in securing participation of women who fit our desire for a broad range of interests. However, we tried to be mindful of different voices in terms of profession, ethnicity, age, ideology, and activism. While we were successful in securing the involvement of important women scholars, artists, and writers, they are all white. The final roster of chairs didn’t represent the whole scope of people we approached, which was really the only complaint I had following the day; that is, more women of colour should have been involved. What I learned in the process of approaching people, especially women of colour, is that if you are a brilliant woman of colour in the art world, you are busy and overbooked. Ditto the situation for international women in the American art world. I tried to remedy this situation in the panel Arlene and I organized, but, again, I was only somewhat successful. I then decided to

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8 The panel chairs were myself, Elizabeth Mansfield, Suzanne Lacy, Helena Reckitt, Joanna Frueh, Mira Schor, and Vivien Fryd.
9 We asked friends, colleagues, peers, people we know well and people whose work or reputations preceded them. Arlene and I made a list of people whose work we admired but neither of us knew personally, in the hopes that we would interest them.
10 I hope that feminist women of colour and international feminists who write and speak in English and are involved in the art world will contact me so I may become more familiar with their work for my future projects.
accompany my introduction to the day of panels (and to my own panel) with a slide show. I contacted all the women whose art currently interests me. Some artists were quite open to having their work shown in this way, while others were cautious. One young Latina artist kept asking me why I wanted to use her work in my presentation, since she hadn’t ever had her work shown in this way. Eventually, I was successful in getting her permission. That slide show of one hundred artists became a subject of much interest, as I was approached by several people who wanted copies to show to their classes, at a conference, and just simply to have for reference.

Arlene and I wanted to have a panel that included discussion of the different generations of feminism. She came up with the idea for a speak-out. Our panel was called “Are We There Yet? The Status and Impact of Second- and Third-Wave Feminism, Women’s Art, the Women’s Art Movement, and ‘Feminist Art’”. In my introduction, I spoke about how the panels were an exciting day of dialogue about feminism, art, the market, the academy, artists, and the art world. I came of age in the second wave of feminist thought and am now integrating the theories of the third wave, such as waves as historical rather than generational eras, which extend many of the issues around enfranchisement, and how they relate to art, artists, and activism. I have discovered that I need to offer my students feminist values, even if they can’t necessarily receive them at the moment we discuss them in class. I have been asking my students about feminism and art for several years now and they have surprised me with both the depth of their interest in feminism and their lack of knowledge about its history in the art world. When I ask if they know any feminist artists, they often tell me “Cindy Sherman.” But when we continue the discussion, the students offer incredible insights such as the response of one student to a comment from another who said “all feminists are angry”: “You are right, she said, “while anger solves nothing by itself, it can be a great motivator in pushing people to fight for more equality.” I continued by discussing my various roles and my impact as a feminist. As a writer and thinker who works in various arenas—speaking to students and academic colleagues, speaking in the scholarly and mainstream art

11 I am grateful to Emmanuel Lemakis and his staff at CAA, as well as Judy Brodsky, Ferris Olin, Tiffany Calvert, and Nicole Plett at Rutgers who provided many kinds of support and assistance in developing the events. Additionally, I must thank Dena Muller, Midori Yoshimoto, and Joan Snitzer for their help. And finally, I acknowledge the kind assistance of the panel chairs who helped shape this day, in addition to managing their own panels. Joanna Frueh and Suzanne Lacy offered me particular advice and help for which I am most thankful.
press, speaking to artists, museum professionals, and their audiences—I have learned that all of my practices are directly related to the success of women artists, to their critical and market reception. Often overlooked in the discussion in America is the consideration of the market. My insight here is that the market and criticism are essential to the success of individual artists and to feminism. There is an intergenerational disconnect in feminism today; activism has to take a more assertive role in our dialogues, our writing, and our teaching. It is important to realize that we have spent decades articulating the problems facing feminist art, now we have to speak about what we will do next. We need to take advantage of our opportunities to discuss feminist issues, artists, and art on every level, from the “do-it-yourself” culture of blogs and zines to our classrooms, tours, acquisitions, exhibitions, articles, and books.

I have learned as a feminist art historian that I have a responsibility to look at both the institutionally ratified artists such as Louise Bourgeois, Nancy Grossman, and Judy Chicago, among others, alongside established artists deserving a retrospective and a monograph, like Rosemarie Castoro, Maren Hassinger, and Mimi Gross, and the rising artists gaining newfound currency in the artworld, such as Mickalene Thomas, Sungmi Lee, and Deidre Houget. It is incumbent upon me to write about their work in an effort to promote its circulation and institutional validation. Historical significance comes through sharing of the privilege to speak authoritatively as a contemporary specialist about their work and to create a critical paradigm that fosters the success of women artists.

When I consider the state of feminism and art today, I am filled with wonder. Ever optimistic, I cling to my early impressions of art as offering the joyful, pleasurable experience that, at its most interesting, makes me think about my world or understand someone else’s world. Feminist art has helped me personally make sense of my world and my experiences. Through the range of discourses in which we participate, we have power. Notwithstanding the complexities of the market, feminism has had and will continue to have an important impact on the reach of art and art history.
Fig. 12-1: Mimi Gross, *Arlene Raven and Her Artgroup Women*, 2006. Oil and oil crayon on canvas, 114 x 159 inches. Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, NYC, and Salander-O’Reilly Gallery, NYC.

**Works Cited**


